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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

GROUP COUNSELING PARENTS OF UNDERACHIEVING
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

BY

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read,
and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Group Counseling
Parents of Underachieving High School Students"
submitted by William Henry Rollans in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of counseling parents in increasing the school achievement of their underachieving high school students.

Sixty-six subjects were selected from the 665 students entering Grade X in Ross Sheppard Composite High School, Edmonton, Alberta, in September, 1965. The basis of selection was a discrepancy between ability test scores and achievement test scores obtained from tests administered to all Grade IX students in the Province of Alberta during the last week of June, 1965. From these sixty-six students, identified as underachievers, thirty students were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the remaining thirty-six students were assigned to the control group.

Parents of twenty-two of the students in the experimental group were willing to participate in group counseling. These parents were organized into four groups which were counseled, within a perceptual

approach to counseling, at two-week intervals over a period of nineteen weeks.

The hypothesis tested was that underachieving students, whose parents have participated in group counseling, will show greater academic improvement than will a control group of underachieving students. However, an analysis of covariance, performed on post-treatment scores for both the experimental and control groups, failed to indicate any significant differences between post-treatment means.

Therefore the hypothesis was not supported.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND THESIS PROBLEM

The recent deluge of literature and research that has been devoted to underachieving students amply reflects the wide concern that society is currently lavishing on these individuals. (Williamson and Cole, 1966)

There are regular reminders that our nation cannot afford to lose the potential that appears to lie dormant in the underachiever. DeWitt (1965) points out that we cannot ignore educative potential if we expect our nation to continue to advance economically. He observes that as a country's economy advances there is more than a proportionate increase in the number and quality of educated men and women needed to serve it. Commager (1965) indicates the breadth of society's need when he observes that: "We have now passed out of the era when education was thought of as a local concern and into the era when education is assumed to be a national concern, and indeed an international concern." Gowan (1960) calls the problem of underachievement a "direct challenge" to education, and the achievement of youth a "paramount issue."

Brookover and his associates (1963) point out that the increasing demand for better trained people obliges the schools to seek to educate a greater proportion of their

students to higher levels. He suggests that most people have innate capacities to learn that are not being fully utilized. This observation, held in common with many educators, indicates that research findings which may be utilized to increase achievement could have wide application and great social significance. How wide this application might extend is suggested by Snyder (1966), Dean of Indiana University Junior Division. He is convinced that 95 per cent of his students are underachievers. While Snyder's definition of underachievement is obviously different from those used in research studies, it none-the-less emphasizes a common concern among educators.

The present writer is aware of the crying needs of human society; but the impetus for this study does not come from this collective human need, but, rather, stems from a personal recognition of the unfulfilled achievement goals of many students, and from a deep concern for the attendant lack of personal satisfaction. Lewin (1935) was one of the first psychologists to show how important it is for individuals to attain, what they perceive as their immediate goals, if they are to continue to strive for higher goals. Goal attainment and goal striving are accepted, by Lewin, as essential to the development of feelings of personal worth and satisfaction in the individual.

Wellington and Wellington (1965) have combined the

educator's responsibility to society, with the educator's responsibility to the individual, in a broad view that is typical of many writers in this area.

. . . the educator's responsibility is to the underachiever for his own sake, and his responsibility is also to society, to which underachievers with good potential should be contributing (p. 114).

In recognizing that these responsibilities are not yet discharged, the present writer accepts underachievement as a worthy topic for research. Research into the problem of underachievement has produced a mass of conflicting evidence. These contradictions, however, cannot be taken as an indication that no stable evidence is available. Factors such as differences in methods of identification of underachievers, the highly selected nature of populations studied, and the interactions among many characteristics that have been linked with underachievement make it difficult to compare studies. Tyler (1961) concludes that results of studies in the area of underachievement are conflicting and difficult to interpret. This conclusion would still appear to be applicable in the light of studies reported since 1961.

Two recent excellent reviews of research reported by Baymur (1958) and Zingle (1965), together with the results of their related investigations, point out that; while many studies have reported improvement in

underachiever's marks, there is a lack of clear-cut, statistically significant evidence to support methods now being used to deal with underachievement in the schools. Evidence is available to show that such methods as tutoring (Blake, 1956), warnings by administrators (Zingle, 1965), training in study skills (Sheldon and Landsman, 1950), remedial reading (Blake, 1956), and personal counseling (Calhoun, 1956) do not provide ready answers to the problem of underachievement in the schools.

To date, research with groups of underachieving students also fails to show significant gains in student's grades. Baymur's (1958) study, which reports no significant changes in students' grades following group counseling, gains support from the findings of Wellington and Wellington (1965) in their unstructured group counseling project, carried on for ten weeks with fifty-one underachieving students.

A related study by Stamatakos and Shaffer (1959) is discussed by Thorndike (1963). In this study intellectually superior freshmen were assigned, on the basis of random selection, to four groups which received differing amounts of personalized attention aimed at stimulating achievement. On the basis of this study Thorndike concluded that:

These findings appear to throw some doubt on many of the presently accepted methods of stimulating superior achievement. Although

many educators strongly support such methods of stimulation as honors programs, enrichment, and personalized attention, there seems to be a paucity of experimental evidence that these methods are accomplishing their aims.

The evidence of success of such programs as presented in related literature appears to be purely subjective in nature and based on student and faculty evaluation (p. 22).

This shortage of evidence does little to encourage counselors to direct their efforts toward underachievement when there appears to be an ever increasing demand for their services in areas where positive results may regularly be observed. This increasing demand is aggravated by the shortage of trained and experienced counselors. If the available counselors are to meet these present demands, while also attempting to discharge their responsibility toward the problem of underachievement, more effective counseling methods must be utilized.

Research studies report that underachievement can be observed in a large percentage of the high school population. Baymur (1965) identified thirty-six high school sophomores as underachievers. This figure represents seventeen per cent of the 209 students in the sophomore class. This percentage, or the lesser one (ten per cent) suggested by Wellington and Wellington (1965), if accepted and considered in relation to the limited counseling time available, leads to the conclusion that some group counseling method must be attempted, if such large numbers of

underachieving students are to be reached.

However, the use of group counseling cannot be justified solely on the basis of its time saving feature. Goldman (1962) warns that despite the presumed advantages--economy of time, sharing experiences, exchanging ideas about handling problems, and discovering that one's problems are not unique--the group method of guidance and counseling seems to have experienced many failures; perhaps most notably in the schools. Despite these negative observations by Goldman, Baymur (1958), in her review of research, and in her research findings, concludes that, at least in the area of vocational and educational counseling, the group method is at least as effective as the individual method.

The present writer accepts the group method as effective on the basis of significant changes reported by Bergstein (1965) and Driver (1958), but has reservations regarding its effectiveness with underachieving students on the basis of studies previously cited (Baymur, 1958; Wellington and Wellington, 1965). However, the possibility of its effective use with parents should not be rejected.

Brookover and his associates (1962) have shown parents to be the only persons, among significant persons, including counselors, to significantly modify their underachieving children's self-concepts.

Parental behavior and attitudes have been linked

with the development of the self-concept, (Wylie, 1961) which appears to play such an important role in school achievement. It follows that group counseling with parents, which has been related to changes in the emotional behavior of their children by Bergstein (1965) and Driver (1958), might also lead to changes in the achievement behavior of their children.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that underachieving students at the high school level, whose parents have participated in group counseling, will show greater academic improvement than will a control group of underachieving students.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the literature provides convincing evidence that the etiology of underachievement is extremely complex. However, investigators are almost unanimous in placing the parents in a central position within this complexity of causal factors.

The Case for Working with Parents

In reviewing literature relating to the problem of underachievement, one is struck by the paradox of almost universal acceptance of the paramount role of parental influence on achievement, and the almost total lack of studies devoted to investigating methods of utilizing this influence toward greater achievement. This is not meant to imply that there are no other influences; but evidence provided by Weigand (1957) suggests that it is a very strong factor. He theorizes that, since parents and children are responsible to one another during the formative years of the children's existence, the parents exert the greatest portion of the influence on the development of adaptive behavior in children.

Sociologists have long implied that the attitudes

of the parents toward their children, and toward each other, profoundly effect the behavior of their children. In Elmstown's Youth, Hollingshead (1949) indicates that his study "clearly and validly demonstrates" (p. 441) that the home an adolescent comes from, conditions, in a very definite manner, the way he behaves in his relations with the school and other social institutions. Clausen and Williams (1963), in their comprehensive review of research into the sociological correlates of child behavior, clearly link academic achievement with the attitudes of parents and the home environment.

Psychologists, while accepting the validity of these sociological implications, have been slow to systematically study the effects that counseling of significant others in the homes has on the school achievement of their children.

Berdie (1955), in recommending greater recognition of the interacting welfare of parents and students by school counselors, points out that:

The importance of the parent in the child's development has been emphasized repeatedly in psychological and psychiatric literature, and the theory of psychoanalysis is based primarily upon the consequences of the child-parent relationship. In counseling literature, however, relatively little reference is made to the influence of the parent upon the child and even less reference is made to the work of the counselor of adolescents as it involves the parent.

Shaw and Dutton (1960), in a study using the Parent

Attitude Research Inventory, link parental attitude with underachievement, but the study does not reveal whether the parental attitudes are one of the results of underachievement, one of its causes, or neither. They suggest that the appearance of underachievement, in most males studied, by Grade I, gives strong support to the causal interpretation. This interpretation is supported by Finger and Schlessner (1965) in an excellent summary of research into the motivational aspects of over and underachievement. They conclude that students apparently come to the classroom with "their motivational commitments" already established.

Brookover and his associates (1962) hypothesize that a child "learns what he perceives he is able to learn" and that self-perception is acquired during interaction with significant others who display expectations of him as a learner. In their study, students at all levels of achievement indicated, almost universally, that their parents were the most important persons concerned with their school work. The second phase of this study, reported by Wellington and Wellington (1965), brings out the importance of involving parents in any approach aimed at assisting underachievers. Wellington and Wellington evaluate this second phase.

The findings of the study show that parents--as the significant others--were the only ones who

significantly modified their children's self-concept of ability. In other words, if a parent values achievement and affords positive support to his child, the child has a higher self-concept and thus better achievement. The implication is that effort should probably be placed on aiding parents to change their concepts of achievement, thus positively affecting the child's self-concept (pp. 91-92).

In discussing this study, Wellington and Wellington do not conclude that individual and group work with underachievers is useless, but they do indicate that it has not been shown to produce significant changes in grades. They also point out that the underachieving student comes into interaction with his parents regularly and intensively, while, in our present schools, it is doubtful that he could come into interaction with a counselor more often than once a week. This greater interaction with parents suggests that the counselor can not expect the student to reject the parents for the counselor in the event of conflict.

Freund (1965) is convinced that children are presently becoming more and more dependent upon their parents as they become less dependent on other adults. As the child's principal source of adult nurturance, the parents play a paramount role in the independence training of their youngsters (Hartup, 1963). McClelland (1953) links independence training to the achievement motive in children. McClelland's data support the hypothesis that higher achievement motives develop in families where there is an emphasis upon the

individual's independent development. He concludes that lower achievement motivation is associated with dependence on, and domination by parents.

While McClelland's observations are based largely on studies of early childhood, Kronovet (1965), from her work with parents of college freshmen, states a related observation in her discussion of achievement motivation:

In their eagerness to help the student proceed and to protect him from disappointment, parents are depriving him of the opportunity of making decisions and of the growth that accompanies these. In desiring the "best" a parent is often instrumental in defeating his own purpose by pushing too hard too soon (p. 693).

This emphasis on the role of the parent in the development of independence in their children, even at the university level, leads one to conclude that, if parents alter, in some way, the independence of their children, this altered independence may help to raise the achievement aspirations of these children, to levels more appropriate to their abilities.

The studies cited above show the close relationship that exists between the attitudes and behavior of parents and the attitudes and behavior of their children. It seems reasonable to assume that one way to change the attitudes and behavior of children would be to change the attitudes and behavior of their parents. It seems to follow that, as an attempt to effect these changes, regularly programmed

counseling with parents would be a highly desirable activity in the school guidance program. Such activity, if successful in changing attitudes and behavior, might lead to significant changes in the academic achievement of the children.

Why, then, have so few counselors in education directed their counseling toward parents?

Berdie (1965) sees the neglect of the parent by authors of texts on counseling as an indication that many counselors may have but little understanding of, and sympathy for, the parents of their counselees. He points out that in order to meet the needs of the counselee, certain of the needs of his parents also must be satisfied. Dunne (1961) warns that counselors, no matter how experienced and expert, can not motivate a student whose parents appear indifferent to his success.

Bergstein (1965) shows concern about the reluctance of counselor educators, authors of guidance textbooks, and school counselors, to harness a greater measure of parental influence in the educational development of children. He suggests several reasons for this reluctance. These reasons are:

- . . . lack of emphasis in this area by those engaged in training counselors, lack of attention to the subject in most textbooks in guidance and counseling, lack of time to do more counseling than he is already doing, reluctance to sacrifice

current duties to make room for counseling with parents, or feelings of inadequacy in working with adults (p. 245).

Certainly the reasons for the dearth of literature and studies devoted to counseling of parents of students who do not appear to be achieving the educational goals that the school considers to be compatible with their tested scholastic ability, are real and understandable. However, when one considers the lack of conclusive evidence to justify the continuation of the usual procedures for dealing with underachievement, one is challenged to overcome whatever is preventing counselors from dealing with the potential motivational forces attributed to parents.

Many counseling studies aimed at utilizing the motivational potential of children have dealt with mothers only (Wellington and Wellington, 1965). However, questionnaire studies carried out by Hoffman (1963), Teahan (1963), and Becker and his associates, (1959), suggest the importance of the father's behavior to the adjustment of the child. The associations found between the behavior of the father and the behavior of the child indicate that any therapeutic practice carried out with parents must be directed, at least in part, at the fathers.

Since fathers are not regularly available during school hours, it follows that any counseling program

involving them would have to be set up to operate during the evening. Since the group method has been shown to be at least as effective as individual counseling (Baymur, 1958), the limited time available in the evenings makes group counseling all but mandatory.

The Case for Working with Parents in Groups

When one accepts the practical reasons for counseling groups of parents in attempts to increase the academic achievement of children, he must then turn to research studies for evidence of the fact that counseling parents in groups can alter the behavior of children. Bergstein (1965) reports that Buchmueller and his associates found, in one project, that eighty per cent of the emotionally disturbed children whose parents were counseled in groups showed "clear-cut improvement." Driver and her associates (1958) report similar results from group counseling parents of "acting-out" teen-agers. In addition to this evidence from guidance settings outside the school, Bergstein (1965) cites two studies in which underachievers, whose parents had been counseled in groups, showed significant changes in behavior. Sonstegard (Bergstein, 1965) conducted an experiment in the group counseling of parents of underachieving fifth-graders. He selected pupils who were judged to be acute underachievers and he invited their parents to attend

group counseling sessions. He also established a control group of pupils in the same class who were matched by sex, intelligence test scores, and average school achievement with the children in the experimental group. Children whose parents were in the experimental group showed significantly greater reading progress than children of the control group, composed entirely of uncounseled parents. Children in the experimental group also showed improvement in work habits and in personal conduct. Zweibelson (Bergstein, 1965) engaged parents of underachieving ninth-graders, from poor neighborhoods, in group counseling. At the close of the project, parents reported improved study habits, greater interest, and better adjustment on the part of their children. Wellington and Wellington (1965) conducted counseling groups for mothers of underachieving boys and girls in elementary school. The children were not seen and the teachers were not interviewed. Taped sessions indicate that mothers were often able to gain insights into their actions and attitudes toward their children. Wellington and Wellington describe these changes below.

More and more the mothers in the groups stopped placing all the blame for the child's underachieving on the child and started to accept their share. They tried to see what they needed to do to change, and the most significant insights seemed to be into this acceptance of their own part, plus willingness not to ride the child so hard (p. 51).

However, no improvement in academic achievement is reported.

A study by Regal and Rizer (1962) involved parents of fifty-four underachieving students in seventeen, single group, weekly meetings. At each meeting instructors attempted to teach parents how to effectively help their children in study skills and to suggest means for providing encouragement and support. In addition to these large group meetings, the mothers met individually with a counselor for one hour every other week. The purpose of the individual sessions was to help the mothers apply the general information covered at the group meetings. A control group of students, matched as to classroom, sex, age, intelligence quotient, and school performance, was compared with the experimental group on the basis of pre- and post-counseling grades in reading, mathematics, and an index of aggregate achievement in all subjects. In "Reading", the subject area that received the most emphasis, the gain of the experimental group was significantly more ($P < .01$) than the gain of the control group. This finding supports the observations of Sonstegard (1962).

In the study by Regal and Rizer (1962) the parents sought this assistance on their own in response to newspaper, radio, and television advertisements. They also paid a ten dollar registration fee. Since the parents of students in the control group had not taken advantage of the assistance offered, they undoubtedly were not matched, motivationally,

with the parents in the experimental group. The present study, by selecting the experimental group at random, attempts to control for different levels of motivation-for-change in parents.

Regal and Rizer fail to indicate the grade levels of the students studied, but from the cases discussed it would appear that all were in the elementary grades. In this respect it resembles most of the studies cited. However, there is evidence that changes in parental attitudes, as a result of group counseling, may still prove effective if carried out when their students are at higher levels of academic instruction.

Kronovet (1965) involved parents of university freshmen in group counseling and observed encouraging results. In her study, parents of all freshmen were offered the opportunity, at a cost of ten dollars, to attend one large orientation meeting and four small-group seminars in which parent-student relationships were explored. Evaluations of the program were obtained from the parents, through anonymous questionnaires, during the last session. Their sons and daughters were sent anonymous questionnaires so that an index of their reactions could be obtained. The reactions of both parents and students were extremely favourable and students seemed able to identify specific changes in their parents attitudes that brought about a

more satisfactory relationship at home.

An extensive parent counseling program carried out at Pennsylvania State University also gives strong support to the premise that changes in parental attitudes may lead to changes in post-secondary students' attitudes and achievement behavior. Wall (1962), reporting on this program, observes that parents react favorably to the one day program, and appear to accept more accurate and reasonable standards of achievement for their freshmen students.

Conclusion Reached from a Review of Related Literature

The large volume of literature devoted to underachievement leaves little doubt that underachievement is considered to be a social problem by sociologists, psychologists, politicians, educators, parents, and students. Despite the wide acceptance of underachievement as an important problem, research to date, has not uncovered any clear-cut solutions. While clear-cut solutions are missing, indications are provided by research, that one area related to underachievement, requires more study and offers some promise of success.

The area, recognized, but largely ignored in school counseling practice, is the realm of parent attitudes and behavior. Counseling of mothers and fathers, in guidance

settings both inside and outside the school, has been shown to result in changes in their attitudes and behavior. However, these studies, based on group counseling with parents of underachievers, have dealt with elementary, junior high school, and college students only. There do not appear to be any counseling studies that have been carried out with groups of parents of underachieving high school students. This represents, to the present writer, a definite gap in research in the area of underachievement.

The studies of Sonstegard and Zweibelson (Bergstein, 1965), Wellington and Wellington (1965), Regal and Rizer (1962), Kronovet (1965), and Wall (1962) relate group counseling of parents to desirable changes in the behavior of children, many of whom were underachieving. However, these studies do not appear to have been conducted within a clearly defined theoretical framework that has been deduced from behavioral research and counseling practice.

Since we do not have any clear indication of what was done in the so-called counseling sessions referred to in the studies cited, it is the intent of this study to suggest a counseling approach based on current theoretical approaches, and to operate within it. It is also suggested that group counseling, based on this framework, is highly likely to be effective.

CHAPTER III

A PERCEPTUAL APPROACH TO GROUP COUNSELING

Although there are many theoretical approaches to counseling, the many studies reviewed in the previous chapters have not given any clear indication of the theoretical framework within which the counseling has been conducted.

This theoretical unknown appears to represent a defect that weakens comparisons and defies replication.

To overcome this defect, it would seem reasonable to attempt a study that is framed within a clearly defined theoretical orientation.

Christensen's (1964) "View of Counseling" represents a new and untested approach to counseling. It integrates the main ideas of several counseling theories into a practical approach to behavioral change that is supported by research.

Christensen's "Attention Shifting" Theory of Counseling

Christensen synthesizes a mass of knowledge, gained from Maslow, Berlyne, Rogers, Luria, Gibson, and others, about the forces that shape human behavior, into a dramatically simple theory that one could hope to carry over into practice with a minimum of distortion. The essence of this

theory has been distilled by Christensen when he posits:

The central hypothesis of my theoretical orientation is that behavior is largely a function of the stimuli to which an individual selectively attends, . . . and it follows that changes in behavior depend on shifting attention to new or unnoticed stimuli (p. 4).

Using Gibson's (1950) definition of stimuli--any energy changes registered by the sense organs--Christensen describes the different sources or kinds of stimuli that are potentially capable of claiming the individual's attention and influencing his behavior. Speech, both by others and self (overt or covert), is given a prominent role as a source of stimuli. Research reported by Luria (1961) provides sound support for the importance of language in directing behavior.

Christensen goes on to point out that an individual responds to only a fraction of the stimuli impinging on him, so is, in effect, using only a small portion of the information available to him. Research findings reported by White (1963) support Christensen's observations that attending to a specific stimulus suppresses attention to other stimuli, and that attempting to pay attention to more than one stimulus leads to inefficient performance. This implies that, an individual, if he is to behave efficiently, must selectively attend to the significant stimulus from a variety of stimuli vying for his attention.

In accepting that changes in behavior depend on shifting attention, Christensen turns to the work of Berlyne (1960) for factors that influence and direct attention. The first of these factors is the novelty or unusualness of the stimulus. This factor is discussed by Christensen.

Think of all the noise around the house that we seldom notice and then consider how attentive we are to a noise in the attic late at night when everything in the house has been quiet. The noise in the attic is a novel stimulus but if it continues, it, too, will become ordinary and we will ignore it. We react in much the same manner to unusual bodily sensations, strange remarks or actions by others, sunsets that differ from the ordinary, abstract art, automobiles that look different, and so on. That which is new or different from what we have regularly experienced is noticed (p. 4).

Another important factor is the role played by statements or gestures by others to notice particular stimuli. In commenting on this factor Christensen points out that an individual is more likely to notice a characteristic of an object or event if it is verbally labeled. He gives interpersonal relations and language special significance in directing attention and indicates the role that it plays in directing individual behavior.

Individuals are continuously being told by others, including counselors, to pay attention to particular aspects of themselves and their environment, including characteristics and behavior of others. If told often enough

and under proper conditions an individual begins to make similar statements and eventually his covert verbalizations direct his attention in the same manner that statements by others did previously (pp. 4-5).

In attending to stimuli that are novel, and to those to which he is verbally directed, many other stimuli are blocked out and ignored by the individual. Christensen points to the use of novelty and verbal direction in counseling efforts to change stable behavior patterns that may have been developed and maintained through the failure to attend to available information.

Shifting a client's attention so that he takes in new information results in significant behavioral changes, while telling a client to act in a specific way and attempting to change the client's response to a stimulus, do not result in significant changes. The practical application of this theory is concisely stated in the following quotation:

In my thinking, counseling is primarily a matter of shifting of attention of the client by talking to him. The client's behavior changes, although not in a predictable fashion, as a result of observing or noticing aspects of the environment and his own behavior previously ignored (p. 5).

Christensen concludes his description of his theory with some hypotheses regarding the consequences of attending to different kinds of stimuli. He advances the general hypothesis that "exclusive attention to a particular kind

of stimulus will lead to some form of disturbance and dissatisfaction." He warns particularly against exclusive attention to internal stimuli, suggesting that this selective attention will gate out environmental stimuli and lead the individual to be ineffectual in coping with his environment. Christensen encourages clients to not think about themselves, as thinking about themselves is not only uncomfortable for them but directs attention to internal stimuli to the exclusion of environmental stimuli.

In further stressing the importance of directing clients' attention to environmental stimuli, Christensen observes that:

Desirable behavior results from a close contact with the environment, to borrow a phrase from Gibson, observing without being preoccupied with self what in fact is happening although it may differ from what others say is happening (p. 6).

This observation leads directly into the final hypothesis: "Reality is more interesting and exciting than fantasy whether generated by self or others."

While Christensen clearly recognizes that the relationship between counseling theory and counseling practice is not a close one, he provides a description of what he does in counseling, that has been taken, by the present writer, as a guide to use in attempting to operate within the "attention-shifting" framework.

Christensen begins his description by indicating

that most, if not all, of the information that he obtains about the client comes from the client himself. Tests or inventories are rarely used as the use of them encourages self-analysis; which tends to gate out environmental information.

To obtain information from the client, the counselor tries to make it easy for the client to talk. The client is frequently encouraged to talk about the people with whom he interacts and about how he responds to various situations.

Diagnosis in the traditional sense is not carried out, but hypotheses about the dynamics of the client's behavior are constantly, though covertly, formulated. Specific environmental events to which the client responds in a consistent manner are looked for. The kinds of stimuli that control the client's behavior and the kinds of stimuli that are ignored are of interest, as are the past experiences and interpersonal relationships that have led up to the client's typical ways of responding and attending. Responses to the client are directed by these hypotheses and impressions that are gleaned from information supplied by the client.

In talking with the client, concrete rather than abstract terms are used and the client is encouraged to do the same. Abstract concepts such as anger and laziness are translated into what people actually say and actually do. The client's attention is directed to his actual

responses and to the actual responses of others.

As the client describes his responses and the responses of others, consistent relationships between the two are pointed out. This is done to make the client aware of the environmental events (external and internal stimuli) that evoke responses in him. The client is also encouraged to note the usual reactions of others to his behavior. By referring to the experiences described by the client, the counselor tries to communicate to the client that his modes of responding, attending, taking in information, and valuing, have resulted from experiences, and are, in a sense, arbitrary.

Since the source of these experiences has been the information to which a client attends, and since the source of the information to which he attends is often supplied by others rather than by his own observations, the client may, on occasion, be misinformed. The client is encouraged to distinguish between the two sources of information, and in cases of discrepancies, to rely on his own observations.

Observing new information, previously ignored, appears to be more effective, in changing behavior, than suggestions to a client that an erroneous belief or interjected value should be changed.

The role that information and stimulation exert in

regulating behavior is pointed out to the client, rather than suggesting that some inner force, "variously called a self-concept, decision maker, motivator, confidence, concentration, and so on," is controlling behavior.

An understanding of the regulatory role of stimulation encourages clients to stop looking internally for ways to control autonomic reactions. Trying to discover modifying internal agents appears to make the individual self-conscious. Christensen explains how he attempts to assist the client to overcome this pre-occupation with self.

To decrease this self-consciousness the client and I talk about "feelings" or internal stimuli until they become ordinary background stimuli requiring no special attention. Then we talk about environmental events and responses to these events. The client is thus encouraged to observe environmental events, his responses, and the accompanying background feelings or sensations, without undue concern about inner forces. Behavior patterns then evolve continuously, naturally, and somewhat unpredictably (p. 7).

By encouraging a verbal exploration of the environment, the counselor indirectly communicates, to the client, something about the function of language. Since words are not the objects and events that they represent, it is important that the client check verbal descriptions with observations to prevent the verbal distortion of reality. In discussing the importance of language in directing attention full cognizance is taken of the

Soviet research summarized by Luria (1961). This research indicates that once a characteristic has been labeled it is much easier to locate and to attend to. Values and beliefs are referred to, by Christensen, as "verbal habits" which result from noticing particular events and ignoring others. These verbal habits are often at the covert level, but are none-the-less effective in directing attention. The essential role of verbalizations--overt and covert--in planning ahead and problem solving, is pointed out, by Christensen, as a final reason for encouraging the client to talk freely about a variety of topics. In verbalizing freely the client will be directing his attention to the wide variety of available information, some of which may have been ignored previously and habitually.

Although the client is encouraged to obtain additional information on his own, the counselor does not hesitate to provide occupational, educational, or test information, or to direct the client to appropriate sources of such information.

Christensen's description of his counseling practice provides the present writer with clearly defined techniques to be utilized in the translation of the "Attention Shifting Theory" into counseling practice.

Discussion

While Christensen has not directed his counseling

theory specifically to the group situation, his views on counseling seem particularly applicable if one accepts Roger's (1951) view that group counseling is very effective in bringing out differences in points of view that would otherwise escape attention. Rogers points out that:

Together, members of a group can see more possible lines of action than if they were consulted individually. Many issues are raised, and this rich and varied expression of ways of life offers to the individual member many alternate perspectives, more varied than the therapist alone can provide (p. 293).

That alternate perspectives may be needed by parents to bring out the reality of their children's behavior is inferred by Berdie (1955). He suggests that most parents have a somewhat distorted memory of their own youth and what they do remember, perhaps, is unique to them. Their attention to the abstract terms with which they talk about their youth may, as Christensen suggests, be adding to this distortion. Berdie feels that many parents have had little contact with the present generation of adolescents and are badly in need of information that will provide a frame of reference in which to interpret their own child's behavior.

It is hoped that by operating within the Christensen "Attention Shifting" Theory of Counseling parents may be helped to shift their attention to a concrete frame of

reference that will bring about changes in their inadequate, but habitualized, patterns of behavior.

Previously quoted research (Bergstein, 1965; Driver, 1958) has established that changes in parents' behavior can lead to changes in their children's behavior. However, the counseling theories under which these studies were carried out are not specified. The Attention Shifting Theory presents a promising and clearly defined orientation directed at behavioral changes. Christensen points out that the direction of these changes are not predictable. However, his theory, under which the present study will attempt to operate, fosters close contact with the environment. If Gibson is correct in stating that "desirable behavior results from a close contact with the environment," then operating under the approach described by Christensen should result, eventually, in greater academic achievement.

CHAPTER IV

THE DESIGN AND PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of counseling parents in helping under-achieving high school students increase their school achievement.

Selection of Subjects

The subjects were selected from the 665 students enrolled in the freshman class (Grade X) entering Ross Sheppard Composite High School, Edmonton, Alberta, in September, 1965.

Ross Sheppard Composite High School is a large urban high school. The majority of its students come from middle-class homes and are initially enrolled in academic programs. The selection of a school in which the student population does not represent the entire school district, is justified if one accepts the findings of a study reported by Roberts (1962). He found no significant differences in the apparent home environments of achievers and underachievers. This finding is supported by Wellington and Wellington (1965) who point out that:

Parents of underachievers do not appear, from our research, to be poor parents in the usual sense. They provide homes which are not outwardly unhappy, and they provide material comforts (p. 54).

Identification of Subjects as Underachievers

Subjects were identified as underachievers on the basis of discrepancy between ability test scores and achievement test scores obtained from tests administered to all Grade IX students in the Province of Alberta during the last week of June, 1965.

The raw scores obtained by Ross Sheppard freshmen on the School and College Ability Test (SCAT), Form Ic, were transformed to normalized standard scores, with a mean of fifty and a standard deviation of ten, for this population of 665 students. The aggregate achievement scores for these students were also translated into normalized standard scores having a mean of fifty and a standard deviation of ten. Any student whose normalized standard score for the SCAT was five or more points greater than the normalized standard score for his aggregate achievement was identified as an underachiever for the purpose of this study.

As a result of this procedure, sixty-six students were selected. Of this sample, thirty-nine were boys and twenty-seven were girls. This is consistent with the findings of Baymur (1958), Ford (1957), and Wellington and Wellington (1965), who also indicate a preponderance of boys among underachievers.

The differences found in normalized standard scores ranged from five to eighteen points. The mean of these

differences was found to be 8.97 and the standard deviation was 3.28. A distribution of these differences is given in Table I.

TABLE I
THE DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCAT
NORMALIZED STANDARD SCORES AND AGGREGATE
ACHIEVEMENT NORMALIZED STANDARD SCORES

Differences	Frequency
5	8
6	8
7	8
8	14
9	7
10	3
11	4
12	4
13	3
14	2
15	0
16	2
17	2
18	1
	<hr/> 66
Mean	8.97
S.D.	3.28

Selection of Groups

An experimental group of thirty students was selected from an alphabetical listing of the underachievers, using a table of random numbers. The remaining thirty-six students were assigned to the control group.

The mean difference for the experimental group was found to be 9.60 with a standard deviation of 3.96. The mean difference for the control group was found to be 8.38 with a standard deviation of 2.47. Statistical tests indicate that the standard deviations for the two groups are significantly different, even though the samples were drawn from the total population by means of random numbers. Because of this difference, adjustments to means are necessary before any statistical comparison between the groups may be made.

A distribution of the differences observed in the experimental group and in the control group is given in Table II.

Description of Counseling Organization and Procedure

The parents of all students in the experimental group were invited (Appendix A) to attend a general meeting held in the school library one week before their children received their first high school report cards.

TABLE II

THE DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCAT NORMALIZED
STANDARD SCORES AND AGGREGATE ACHIEVEMENT NORMALIZED
STANDARD SCORES FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL
GROUP AND THE CONTROL GROUP

<u>Differences</u>	<u>Frequencies</u>	
	Experimental Group	Control Group
5	4	4
6	4	4
7	2	6
8	6	7
9	3	4
10	1	2
11	2	1
12	1	3
13	1	2
14	1	1
15	0	0
16	2	0
17	2	0
18	1	0
	<u>30</u>	<u>34</u> [*]
	Mean 9.60	8.38
	S.D. 3.96	2.47

^{*} Every student in the experimental group remained in the school for the entire length of the study. The Control group was reduced to 34 students, when one student dropped out of school and another moved out of the school district.

In this invitation the parents were informed that their children appeared to have greater ability than was indicated by the final grades obtained by them in Grade IX. It was pointed out, in the invitation, that the first meeting might lead to a series of discussion meetings. The present writer was the only school staff member in attendance and the only counselor involved in the study. Teachers and administrators were not aware of which students were identified as underachievers and did not know which parents were members of groups.

Twenty-two students were represented by parents at the general meeting--fifteen by both parents and seven by one parent. Of the latter seven, four were the only parents presently living in the homes. The parents of four students had indicated previously that they were unable to attend the first meeting, but wished an opportunity to attend any subsequent meetings. The parents of four students did not attend, nor did they contact the school regarding future meetings.

At the general group meeting, the parents were informed of the aims of the study, and were invited to join small groups for further discussion of the problem of underachievement. Parents of seventeen students accepted this invitation and signified the times at which they would be available for such meetings; four

wished to discuss the matter with the students involved before committing themselves to meeting again and one parent indicated that he would not join a group.

Following the general meeting, the text of the formal presentation (Appendix B) was sent to all parents in the experimental group. Parents who had not enrolled in a group were invited (Appendix C) to do so.

As a result of these preliminary efforts, parents representing twenty-two students, became members of groups. Parents were assigned to groups on the basis of the evening and time preference indicated by them from the four choices available. Parents of six students were represented in each of two groups and parents of five students were represented in each of the remaining two groups. Parents of the eight students not represented, were given a further invitation (Appendix D) but did not respond by joining a group.

The parents of two students failed to attend any group meeting, although they had been present at the general meeting and had indicated that they would become members of groups. The parents of twenty students attended at least one group meeting. The parents of four students attended two group meetings only, the parents of two students attended three group meetings and the parents of fourteen students attended a minimum

of four of the seven group meetings over a period of nineteen weeks.

Attendance at the meetings was related to the weather. On two occasions the meetings were cancelled, because of extremely cold weather,

All groups arranged to suspend meetings during the Christmas season, making a total of three regular meeting times that were not utilized.

The meeting times were spaced at two week intervals following considerable discussion in the general session. Parents were informed by letter of the time and date of the first meeting. Parents who did not attend the first meeting were phoned on the day of the next meeting, but if they did not attend the second meeting they were not reminded of subsequent meetings. However, they received any information that was made available to parents of students in the experimental group.

During the course of the study, parents who missed a meeting were contacted prior to the next meeting, but if they failed to attend this meeting, they too, were not specifically reminded of the following meeting.

Procedure

The counseling sessions were held in a comfortably furnished staff lounge. A sofa and several easy chairs

were loosely arranged around a large coffee table on which several ashtrays were placed. This table provided a surface large enough to accommodate any printed material distributed to the group. The length of each session had been set at one hour by the parents at the general meeting and this fact was made clear at the beginning of the first session. When the hour was over the groups were informed that anyone who wished to leave should do so--even if others were obviously intending to carry on with the discussion. A definite attempt was made to develop an informal atmosphere in which the group members would feel free to talk.

At the first meeting of each group the counselor very briefly and informally outlined the goal of the project as "finding real--not imagined--underlying causes for each student's underachievement and having each parent find his real--not imagined--relationship to these underlying causes." It was pointed out that the group, in examining these relationships, might be able to offer useful suggestions from their varied, but related experiences. The counseling theory under which the counselor attempted to guide the group, was briefly explained and was generally accepted as "making sense" by the groups. A list of characteristics (Appendix E) that have been linked with underachieving students in recent studies and articles was distributed to each parent. This list

stimulated very free discussion and attentions were shifted from the characteristic usually observed to characteristics manifested in the child but, until then, given little attention by the parent. The parents were encouraged to observe the characteristics of their own children and to share these observations with the group at the next meeting.

Each subsequent meeting was started with: "Well what happened during the past two weeks," and the group was usually launched on a series of descriptive events that at first seemed, to the counselor, to be thinly veiled apologies. However, in the defensive search for reasons outside themselves and their children much false information and confused thinking was uncovered and the reality of the situation was more clearly disclosed and tested.

The first sessions were filled with accounts of the students' non-academic proficiency--athletic prowess, musical talent, social accomplishments. These sessions were also liberally supplied with information about academically able siblings and allusions to personal academic successes: ("My husband and I each have two university degrees and Pam knows how hard we worked to earn them"). These comments, together with their willingness to attend the group sessions, seemed to indicate the prime position afforded academic achievement in their scales of values.

Much time, in the early sessions, was also spent in exposing the "obvious" flaws in the educational systems and institutions, past and present. Such statements as: "Modern Mathematics should never be introduced in Grade IX. A student who starts in traditional mathematics should be allowed to complete his matriculation in traditional mathematics." And: "I think that Ian's basic problem is his reading. His Grade One teacher didn't stress phonics the way that I feel she should," were expressed in all groups and seemed to strike sympathetic chords in other parents. Such questions as: "Are other students finding the same difficulty in adapting to Modern Mathematics?" And: "Do other students who had the same Grade One teacher seem to be having similar difficulties?" were at first advanced by the present writer, but were soon being asked by at least two members of each group. In one group, all but one parent became actively involved in shifting attention to concrete information. Poorly designed programs and courses, arbitrary administration, ineffective and unsympathetic teachers, incompetent--and in some cases unnecessary--counselors, all came under attack. However, a closer examination of related information always led, no matter how wanting they found the educational system, back to the home. One parent observed that: "When you consider how openly critical of education we've been in our home it is little

wonder that our kids don't seem to rate school success too high." Observations such as these became more frequent in later sessions and many parents began to realize that they were unable to effect any great changes outside the home. This was followed, for some, by clearly verbalized recognitions that it was not likely to be changes in the environment of the student that would equip him for success, but, rather, changes in the behavior of the student in relation to his environment as it exists in the here and now. These same parents seemed to become more aware of the role that they played in their children's behavior, and to discover new approaches--new ways of reacting--to their children's behavior. Some of these new approaches were reported, by parents, to be effective in creating more harmony in the home and leading to definite increases in family conversation.

Despite the satisfaction that was obvious in the parents who were beginning to recognize information previously ignored, other parents left their groups without expressing anything that would suggest that their behavior had been altered by the counseling experience.

The present writer was utilized frequently throughout the study to provide specific information about school matters, but he was soon able to withdraw almost completely from the role of "attention-shifter." Some members in each

group soon began to press for concrete information about the matter being discussed. While none of these sessions were recorded on tape, several examples of the kinds of information that were exchanged are given below. These examples are not direct quotes but are reconstructed, as accurately as is possible, from memory and from brief notes made following each session.

Example 1

Mrs. A. "Well what do you do when your daughter stays out later than you said she could?"

Mrs. B. "I really get mad!"

Mrs. A. "Well so do I--but what do you do about it?"

Mrs. B. "To tell the truth I don't usually say anything, maybe I'm afraid to. I just glare at her as if I can't stand the sight of her and point to her room. She gets the message."

From this point more members of the group became involved in discussing the use of silence in their behavior and in the behavior of their children. They began relating it to the role of language--which by this time was becoming well understood by some. They generally concluded that, while silence was a definite means of communicating a message to another person it was not an effective method. It is too static; offering no opportunity for the personal interaction and exploration that seems necessary to reaching

mutual understanding. If silence communicates the wrong message--and Mrs. B. is sure her silence does--it offers no chance for clarification.

Example 2

Mr. C. "These groups have really taught me something that I've needed to know for a long time. I've always felt sorry for my kid when he said that he had a lousy teacher, because I knew what that could be like. I'd always known in the back of my mind that if Mr. D. had any idea how to teach chemistry and to get along with young people, I would have finished high school. In fact I know that John has often heard me talk about my tough luck in that regard. It's been "poor me" instead of "how could I have handled the situation" for so long that I shouldn't be surprised to see the same thing in John."

This statement, made early in the session, led to a very interesting exploration of the role of the parent as a model for the child. The need to display responsible behavior was accepted by the parents as essential to the development of responsible behavior in their children.

Example 3

Mr. E. "Well it's awfully hard to remain pleasant when you've already told him ten times to get down to his books."

Mr. F. "You know I seldom talked to anyone unless they had done something that annoyed me. I think that I've been going around just looking for trouble. I wasn't that much worse with the kids than I was with my wife (she nodded her approbation) or the men in my plant. Since we've been coming here I've really tried new approaches to dealing with people and I really think it's working. (He became quite excited) I'm joking with the kids, eating lunch with my men and really talking things over with Mary. I'm finding out that there's a lot of things about all of them that I should have been appreciating all along."

The obvious sincerity of Mr. F's disclosures clearly impressed the group and several members openly expressed their pleasure at Mr. F's success.

Two persons in other groups claimed similar sweeping changes in their behavior and attitudes toward people. All three expressed the hope that they would be able to attend similar group meetings during the following school term.

Example 4

Mrs. F. "I don't really think that my boy is an underachiever; his health seems to be holding him back."

Mr. G. "What seems to be his trouble?"

Mrs. F. "Well he had asthma and hay fever when he

was younger, and even though he seems to have outgrown these, he doesn't have the energy that he should."

Counselor: "Could you give us an example of the things he does that show you that he lacks energy."

Mrs. F. "This happens several times a week. If breakfast isn't on the table when he comes down in the morning, he flops down on the chesterfield until I call him--which usually isn't more than a minute later."

Mrs. H. "Have you had him to the doctor?"

Mrs. F. "Oh yes, we all have annual check-ups, and the doctor can't find anything wrong."

Counselor: "Does he seem to be able to muster up energy for the things that you know he enjoys doing?"

Mrs. F. "Well he's been in a dance band for almost a year and I think that he could quite happily improvise on his guitar every night until dawn if we'd let him."

It was also discovered that Mrs. F's son had a band practice every Wednesday night that "always lasted longer than it should," dance engagements most Friday and Saturday nights and piano lessons Monday evenings. In Grade IX he was a member of the School Boys' Band and completed examinations in piano and musical theory.

Mrs. F. finally said: "I guess that we've always made too much fuss over his music--especially me. I play the piano for a choral group each winter and look

forward to it so much. I know that I often neglect my home duties to practice new numbers--or maybe its just to do something that I enjoy more than housework. But how do you change established facts like these?"

This last quote represents the characteristic discussion pattern in the groups. The discussion would begin with some facts regarding a student's under-achievement and would end with a frank analysis of parental attitudes and behavior.

CHAPTER V

STATISTICAL TREATMENT AND FINDINGS

Underachievement in this study is defined as a normalized standard score for a measure of a student's ability (SCAT) that is five or more points greater than a normalized standard score for a measure of a student's achievement (final Grade IX aggregate achievement score). Following the counseling of parents in groups, differences between the normalized standard scores for the measure of ability (SCAT) and the normalized standard scores for the post-treatment measure of achievement (final Grade X aggregate achievement score), were computed.

The post-treatment score for each student was obtained by summing the final percentage marks obtained in five academic subjects. These post-treatment scores, for the 648 students who remained[★] in the freshman class during the entire school term, were transformed into normalized standard scores with a mean of fifty and a standard deviation of ten. Differences between the

[★]Six hundred and sixty-five students were registered in Grade X and were the subjects used in identifying under-achievers. This is a two and one-half per cent attrition.

normalized standard scores for ability (SCAT) had been calculated in the same manner. Differences between post-treatment normalized standard scores for achievement and normalized standard scores for ability for both the experimental and control groups were then readily calculated.

The means and standard deviations of both the pre and post-treatment scores were calculated. For the post-treatment scores adjusted means were also calculated. Both sets of means and standard deviations are presented in Table III.

TABLE III

PRE-TREATMENT AND POST-TREATMENT MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCAT NORMALIZED STANDARD SCORES AND AGGREGATE ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD SCORES FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

Group	N	<u>Means</u>			<u>S.D.</u>	
		Pre-	Post-	Adjusted	Pre-	Post-
Experimental	30	9.60	11.03	10.56	3.96	10.11
Control	34	8.38	10.06	10.48	2.47	6.83
Difference		1.22	0.97	0.08	1.49	3.28

Following the calculation of the mean and standard deviation of post-treatment scores for both the experimental

and control groups, a one-way analysis of covariance was performed. An analysis of covariance design was used, rather than the planned use of an analysis of variance design, because the variances of the pre-treatment scores were significantly different. This comparison between experimental and control groups was therefore expressed in the form of the significance of the difference between adjusted post-treatment means. A summary of this analysis of covariance is presented in Table IV.

TABLE IV
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE OF THE POST-
TREATMENT SCORES OF THE EXPERIMENTAL
AND CONTROL GROUPS

Source of Variation	df	Mean Square	Adjusted F	Probability
Between Groups	1	0.09	0.001	0.97
Within Groups	61	70.27		

It is obvious from even a cursory inspection of Table IV that the difference between the experimental adjusted mean and the control adjusted mean is not

significant. The adjusted F of .001 and the probability of less than .97 certainly lend support to this observation. It must therefore be noted that the data available do not lend support to the hypothesis.

Thus it may be concluded that underachieving high school students, whose parents have participated in group counseling, do not show greater academic improvement than does a control group of underachieving students.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

SUMMARY

Academic underachievement is recognized by many as a major social and individual problem (DeWitt, 1965; Commager, 1965; Gowan, 1960). The responsibility for discovering and effecting solutions to this problem is clearly delegated to the schools and the counselors operating in the the schools (Brookover and his associates, 1963; Wellington and Wellington, 1965). The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of group counseling of parents in raising the level of school achievement of their high school freshmen.

There is ample evidence in recent research to indicate that present methods being utilized by school administrators and guidance workers directly with the underachieving students fail to produce significant increases in achievement (Baymur, 1958; Blake, 1956; Calhoun, 1956; Sheldon and Landsman, 1950; Wellington and Wellington, 1965; Zingle, 1965).

Research studies have consistently linked behavior and attitudes of parents with the behavior and attitudes

of their underachieving students (Brookover and his associates, 1962; Weigand, 1957), but no attempts to utilize this parental relationship to help high school underachievers have been reported.

The present study was operated on the assumption, supported by research reported by Bergstein (1965) and Wellington and Wellington (1965), that counseling parents in groups would lead to changes in the behavior and attitudes of the parents which in turn would lead to changes in the behavior and attitudes of their children. Since counseling theories predict that these changes will be toward more effective behavior, it follows that more effective parental behavior will lead to more effective behavior in their underachieving children. It is hypothesized that more effective behavior in underachieving students should be evidenced in greater academic achievement.

DISCUSSION

Although the predicted change in academic achievement was not observed in this study, other changes appear to have been effected by the group counseling of parents. Christensen (1964) points out that shifting the attention of a client by talking to him leads to behavioral changes, but he also indicates that the nature of these changes is not predictable.

Many comments were made by parents indicating that they were benefiting from the group counseling and that they accepted the premise that changes in their behavior and attitudes could lead to desirable changes in their children's behavior and attitudes. These comments prompted the counselor to introduce an anonymous questionnaire, which could be voluntarily completed by the parents at the last group session. Fully recognizing the shortcomings of self-reporting devices, the present writer is convinced that the responses of the eleven parents who returned the questionnaire, provide indications of changes with which this study was not concerned. A summary of these responses (Appendix F) indicates that, in general, the students were working more effectively and appeared pleased that their parents were involved in the project. The parents, generally, reported that the group sessions had improved their relationships with their children and that participation in the study had been worthwhile to them. Eight parents indicated a willingness to participate in a similar project during the following term. The responses under the heading "Comments, Criticisms, and Suggestions" included the following:

Even if this type of thing didn't help
all concerned, if it assisted just a
few it proved worthwhile and I recommend
that it be carried on in the following
school term.

We would like to see a similar project started for parents of students in lower grades.

I was very interested in your present discussion groups and felt it was very worthwhile, but I found it possible to attend only two meetings.

We were sorry to miss the other sessions, but they fell on a night when we were busy. Our son is not improving this year, but we feel that he is in a program which is too difficult for him--due to his immaturity and study habits.

As our answers to the foregoing questionnaire indicate, we feel that the project was of definite value both to our daughter and to ourselves.

The subject of underachievement is highly complex, as we discovered from the group discussions. For this reason, we who participated (excluding your good self!) who are not psychologists, social workers, or Solomons, could no doubt be classed as underachievers (!) from the point of view of having only scratched the surface of the problem so far.

It is questionable how much farther we can go towards obtaining a solution to this problem, but with such a good beginning, we consider that the project should be continued.

Similar comments to the above were heard in all sessions, which indicate to the present writer that the attention of parents was shifted to new stimuli and that the responses initiated in themselves were perceived to be worthwhile. Bergstein (1965) quotes a study by Ginott, which reported that parents indicate "satisfaction

and insights" from group counseling. Such outcomes, which were observed by the present writer in many of the parents counseled, seem desirable and well worth the time expended by the counselor. That the school may also benefit from such projects is suggested by Hassell (1965) from his work with parents. He observes that:

Person to person contacts between home and school develop a mutual feeling of respect, esteem, confidence, and affection with an absence of patronization and condescension (p. 368).

These mutual benefits are also predicted by Trail (1965) from his contact with parents in a visitation program. Trail states that:

The parents' response bolsters our belief that parents deserve to know as much about their schools as they are willing to learn. And the response supports our conviction that good school public relations is not incompatible with full-time devotion to academic concerns. The parents get to know about the schools, they support the schools at home; their children thus receive educational encouragement on a total scale. And "class" extends from the school room to the living room (p. 83).

The present writer concludes that, even though slight declines were observed in school achievement at the end of Grade X this does not preclude the possibility of eventual positive outcomes. Researchers must consider the possibility of waiting two or three years

before attempting to assess the effects of the counseling. It is likely that changes may not be evident for a year or more after group experiences.

The expectation on which this study was based is that group counseling parents will lead to changes in their attitudes and behavior. It was further expected that the changes in parents' attitudes and behavior will lead to changes in their children's attitudes and behavior which in time will be evidenced in greater academic achievement. In retrospect it seems reasonable to expect that a treatment, so far removed from the anticipated outcome of improved school marks, will require a long period of time to effect its changes. A follow-up study of the participants in this study is, therefore, planned.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The fact that academic improvement was not observed in this study does not necessarily indicate that similar studies should not be attempted.

All of the group sessions in this study were conducted by the same counselor, and it is possible that the lack of evidence of change in academic achievement is related to his ineffectiveness. Other counselors may be more effective in working with parents

of underachievers and in applying the "Christensen Attention Shifting" approach to counseling. Using a different counselor for each group would overcome the limitation imposed by the use of one counselor with all groups.

A criterion other than improvement in marks may be more properly applied to determine the effectiveness of counseling parents of underachievers. A measure which could register changes in the happiness of parents and/or students might be a more realistic criterion than school marks, for evaluating the effectiveness of group counseling parents of underachieving students.

While studies involving parents of elementary students in group counseling for four months or less have reported significant increases in the children's reading grades (Sonstegard, 1962; Regal and Rizer, 1962), longer periods of therapy may be required if increases are to be observed in the grades of underachieving high school students.

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A P P E N D I C E S

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX A

ROSS SHEPPARD COMPOSITE HIGH SCHOOL

13546 - 111 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
October 28, 1965

Dear _____:

You are cordially invited to attend a short meeting, which may lead up to a series of discussion meetings, to be held in the Ross Sheppard School Library at 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday, November 3rd.

These meetings will form part of a project which is limited, for this year, to a group of parents chosen at random, whose Grade X students seem to possess greater ability than is indicated by their Grade IX results.

It is sincerely hoped that, by home and school working more closely together, your child may be encouraged to make the most effective use of his ability.

If you are interested in attending this first meeting, please phone me at 454-8576 during school hours, or if more convenient, fill in the bottom portion of this letter and return it to the school.

We strongly urge your participation as we are convinced that sharing information in this way may benefit your child.

Yours very truly,

W. H. Rollans,
Department Head,
Department of Guidance.

WHR/

I/We will be able to attend: _____
(name or names)

I/We will not be able to attend: _____
(name or names)

APPENDIX B

MEETING WITH PARENTS OF GRADE TEN STUDENTS

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1965 - ROSS SHEPPARD COMPOSITE

First, I would like to thank you sincerely for the concern that you have shown by coming here this evening in response to a letter which gave you very little information as to the nature of the project in which you are asked to share.

Second; I would like to allay any alarm that you may feel over the present performance of your child. You were chosen solely on the basis of your child's results on the Grade IX Departmentals and not on any evidence of lesser achievement in the Grade X program.

Third; I must inform you that the data used to identify your child as one who has the potential for higher academic achievement is not infallible. You may very well come to the conclusion, during our discussions, that your child is performing adequately, and that efforts to increase his academic achievement are not called for or might even be unwise.

These meetings, if they do continue, will not provide an opportunity for you to obtain specific information about your child's abilities, strengths, weaknesses, marks or deportment. Neither will they provide you with the opportunity to pass specific information or complaints to the administration of the school. After each report, several evenings are set aside for parents and their children to meet with Miss Staples, Mr. Henderson, or one of the counselors, to exchange information of this kind.

What then can you hope to gain from these meetings?

The most optimistic outcome for which we can hope is that you will help each other to better understand his own child and that this better understanding will allow you to communicate to him your real concern for his welfare.

Next, I hope that this deeper understanding will help you discover ways of assisting your child toward his placing increased value on success in studies. If he once accepts this value as his own and is encouraged to take personal responsibility for adjusting his habits and attitudes, where necessary, to gain this success, his path to maturity should become clearer and more promising.

This does not mean that we can place the same measure

of success in studies on all of the young people represented by the parents here this evening. For some, success will be indicated by the completion of a four-year Junior Matriculation program which will prepare them for entry into a technical program at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. For others, success will be measured by academic honors or perhaps coveted scholarships on a course which opens up the possibility of university degree programs. For still others, success may be measured by the completion of a clerical business program which will prepare them for careers in the offices of government and industry. For a few, success may be measured by the fact that a student chooses to enter a vocational trades and service program at the end of Grade X rather than dropping out of school and into the ranks of the untrained.

How should we organize future meetings?

Recent research clearly indicates that the size of any discussion group must be kept small if it is to obtain maximum participation from each member. If a sufficient number is willing to embark on a series of meetings, I would like to propose that we limit each group to parents from five families. If such small groups are to be effective it will be necessary for one parent, but preferably both, to take very seriously the responsibility for attending regularly. This may seem burdensome at first, because it usually takes several sessions before the group interacts freely.

Meetings will be limited to one hour in length and will be arranged at any times that are convenient to any five family groups. If you decide to attend, please indicate on the sheet that you received earlier, the three times that would be most convenient for you. Also indicate whether you favor meeting each week or at two-week or monthly intervals.

These group meetings will operate on the same principles that govern group counseling sessions with students. The information exchanged in these sessions will be treated as confidential and will not be transmitted in any identifiable way to anyone, including our school administration. As a group, it is conceivable that we would like to invite a person from the school administration, from the field of Educational Psychology, or from any other area that might add to our understandings. This, I'm sure, could be arranged.

These small groups will vary in their effectiveness and in the directions that they take in their exploration. For this reason, it might be useful to meet together again at the end of our smaller sessions, to exchange our ideas and our insights.

Can such group meetings produce benefits?

If you accept the possibility that underachievement may be a problem at some time in your child's life, I think that you will find these meetings beneficial. It has been clearly demonstrated that groups of ordinary people have, within the range of their capacities, the ability to recognize, define, and solve their common problems. Your child may need the power of this group action, and I can assure you that the school needs solutions and that society as a whole needs solutions to the problems surrounding underachievement. However, I do not think that we can expect dramatic changes. Even the most gifted children cannot improve overnight, despite the fact that they are often highly optimistic about their chances of making immediate recoveries. Be prepared to show your pleasure and approval over even the smallest gains.

Even if you do not feel that your child is a potential underachiever in high school, I can guarantee that these meetings will add greatly to your understanding of young people in general and your child in particular.

Why did we choose to draw parents into this project?

In our large communities, the teacher does not live next door where you can air mutual concerns over the fence. In our large specialized schools, so necessary to the education for our industrial society, no single teacher remains with your child for the entire school day exerting influences and imparting values. In urban society today the home stands out clearly as the most potent force in shaping the academic expectations of young people. This makes us increasingly aware of the importance of the family and its home life in relation to the problems faced by students. The relationships between the student and his parents and his brothers and sisters, the stability of the family, and the various possible personal problems of each member of the family have an effect on the student's personal well-being and may have an effect on his ability to study. It is the home that society must count on to de-emphasize values that are conflicting for first place with the value of success in studies. Some of these values that might be considered are: (1) the increased emphasis on the value of success in competitive sports, (2) the social pressure to date, and the prime value placed by many students, especially girls, on developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with the opposite sex, (3) the all too common high value placed by a student on his relationship with the "guys" (or "gals") who may be anything but serious minded students.

The student may avoid success in studies if the home fosters the "egg-head" stereotype--the good student is the slightly built, horn-rimmed, comically pathetic young person. If the home puts too much emphasis on the prestige and money rewards of education rather than on the intellectual benefits or the love of learning, the student seems to have difficulty in sustaining his motivation. How the home reflects the school and its role is also important. If it is not represented as fulfilling desirable functions, or is too often criticized as ineffective, or if you intimate that it is staffed with "oddballs," you cannot expect a student to take it too seriously. I am not suggesting that any of these conflicting values or impressions are ever present in your home, but I'll openly confess that they creep into my home on occasion, especially as hockey season rolls around.

Finally, I would like to pass on certain observations that may be important to you all at this time immediately prior to your child's first high school report. Please do not use this report as a weapon, or as a medal. If marks are not as high as you had hoped, show your warm concern and your willingness to assist in any way you can to foster improvement. Please don't make it an occasion for venting your disfavor and denying privileges. A frank discussion in the evening might lead to the student developing, with you, a mutually acceptable new approach. So much is done for children in our affluent society that they need real and continued encouragement to take responsibility for planning a better method of learning. Maintain a positive attitude, help your child to see that there is a way to reach a solution if all alternatives are considered. Emotional outbreaks over reports can foster defeat reactions that lead to still more undesirable achievement. Also be very sure that you are realistic in your own expectations. Not all students can gain high marks.

If the report meets or exceeds your expectations show how pleased you are for them. Some parents make their children feel that they are no longer prized for themselves, but for the status they bring the family by their academic achievement.

Whatever the outcome, clearly recognize, and let your children know that you appreciate their many successful steps on the developmental trail. All children need that sustaining element, common to us all--personal achievement. They need the feeling of security or "belongingness" that can only come from affection freely given--no strings attached.

ROSS SHEPPARD COMPOSITE HIGH SCHOOL

13546 - 111 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta

Dear ____:

As a result of the favourable response of parents to our meeting last Wednesday, discussion groups have been set up to meet for one hour every other week.

The regular meetings will be held at 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m., and 9:00 p.m. in the school library on Monday and Tuesday evenings.

There are still a few openings, particularly in the 9:00 p.m. groups.

If you would like to join one of these groups, please return the bottom portion of this sheet to the General Office of the school, or phone 454-8576.

The enclosed mimeographed sheets give the text of the short introduction delivered at our first meeting.

Yours very truly,

W. H. Rollans,
Department Head
(Guidance)

WHR/

Name: _____

I/We would like to join a discussion group.

We would prefer to meet at _____ on _____

If this time is not available, we could meet at any of the following times:

1. _____ on _____

2. _____ on _____

3. _____ on _____

ROSS SHEPPARD COMPOSITE HIGH SCHOOL

13546 - 111 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
December 1, 1965

Dear _____:

Because of the favourable reactions to our first group meetings we have decided to meet regularly at two week intervals.

Our next groups will meet in the West Common Staff Room on Monday, December 6th, and Tuesday, December 7th, at both 7:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

You are cordially invited to join us at any of the above times to determine whether or not such meetings could prove worthwhile to you. No phone call is necessary.

The Main Door on 111th Avenue will be open from 6:45 p.m.

If you wish further information please phone me at the school (454-8576) between 1:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Yours very truly,

W. H. Rollans,
Guidance Department Head

WHR/

CHARACTERISTICS THAT HAVE BEEN LINKED
WITH UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Academic underachievement has been recognized as a social problem for centuries. Since it is a problem that is still with us, we must recognize that there is no single cause, nor single answer. We cannot forcibly change these characteristics that we see in our children in the hope that such changes will improve achievement. Changes will only occur when a child accepts, as his own, values and attitudes that are more in line with the values and attitudes found in academic achievers.

Some of the characteristics that have been linked with academic underachievement are:

1. Happy-go-lucky. Lack of concern. Satisfied with passing grades.
2. Immature. Not realistic in light of past experience.
3. A disinclination to admit personal problems. Willing to accept only the good in selves.
4. Procrastination. Putting things off until too few tomorrows are left.
5. Tend to see others in a favourable light, despite defects apparent to a more mature person.
6. Ownership of a car or scooter. They take too much time, money, energy.
7. They don't expect academic success. See themselves as poor students and accept this picture.
8. Generally emotionally well-adjusted. They accept their situation better than the home and school does.
9. Tend to have strong drives towards pleasure, power, and extroversion (showing off). Seem to have less personal need for academic achievement.
10. Not likely to have settled on a specific vocational goal.

FORCING A CHILD TO MAKE A CHOICE WON'T WORK HERE.

APPENDIX E (continued)

11. See value of college education in \$'s and ¢'s rather than in intellectual growth.
12. Overly dependent on parents for decisions.
13. When asked about the marks they hope to get next time, they greatly over-estimate their recovery--in fact, they usually go down.
14. Accept less self-responsibility for achievement. They tend to blame dull or unfair teachers, their program, uninteresting courses, the marking system and school policies.
15. Best friends don't take studies seriously.
16. More likely to be going steady.
17. Identification and association with an older age group--especially in competitive sport.
18. Single parent homes or homes in which there is continual tension.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete the following questions, and return this sheet in the self-addressed, stamped envelope enclosed. A great deal of time was spent on this project, and we are anxious to learn whether or not this approach can be improved and attempted next year with other groups of parents.

1. How many sessions (including the first meeting in the Library) did you attend?
3 to 8
2. Do you feel that your child was an "underachiever" at the end of Grade Nine?
YES 7 NO 3
3. Do you feel that your child is now working more effectively than at the beginning of this term?
YES 7 NO 2
4. Have any of the group discussions helped you in your relationship with your child?
YES 9 NO 2
5. Does your child resent, in any way, your attendance at our meetings?
YES 1 NO 10
6. Does your child seem pleased to have you involved in this project?
YES 9 NO 2
7. Has your participation in this project been worthwhile to you?
YES 10 NO 1
8. Should our school organize a similar project for parents of underachieving students entering Grade Ten in September, 1966?
YES 10 NO 1
9. Would you be willing to participate in a similar project next year; assuming that it would be improved as a result of our experiences and suggestions this year?
YES 8 NO 1
10. Do you wish to continue meeting for additional group discussions this term?
YES 5 NO 6

(If the answer is yes, please put your name on this page,
or phone me at 454-8576)

COMMENTS, CRITICISMS, AND SUGGESTIONS

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